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N.O. and the Americas

Cuban Force Trained Here For Invasion

By BILL STUCKEY

Were Cubans trained in New Orleans for the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion last April 17?

Asking that question early last year, reporters could have used an electronic computer to keep up with the number of denials. Even today, on the eve of the first anniversary, the government has yet to issue official confirmation of New Orleans' role in the invasion.

As a matter of fact, only the Castro government ever formally named New Orleans as a Bay of Pigs training ground. And as a matter of fact, Castro was right.

A complete account of the fate of the locally-trained Cuban contingent was obtained by The States-Item from reliable U.S. sources and is made public for the first time today. Further details were added by Nino Diaz, who was the acknowledged leader of the New Orleans Cuban invasion force.

Diaz, who now lives in Miami, is a former Cuban coffee exporter who joined Castro's rebel army as a major. He left Castro three months before Fidel seized power due to growing Communist influence in the rebel army, he said.

The locally-trained Cubans led by Diaz never landed. They were intended to serve as back-up troops, entering the battle only after the initial waves had established a beachhead at the Bay of Pigs.

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A CHRONOLOGICAL account follows:

Some 163 Cubans, mostly from the Miami area, were brought here about Feb. 10, 1961, for pre-invasion training. They were taken to the old Navy ammunition dump, in Algiers near the Plaquemines parish line, where they were trained in strictest secrecy.

U.S. sources estimated the number of troops trained here at a higher figure. However, they acknowledged that a number of the trainees were "flunked out" because they were temperamentally unsuited for combat. Where they were taken is still a mystery.

Armed guards kept all visitors, including U.S. military men not involved with the training, out of the vast ammunition dump site.

None of the recruits and few of the training officers, were allowed to leave the area during the training period.

Letters written by the recruits were flown to Florida and mailed with a Miami postmark.

Even leaders of local Cuban refugee organizations did not learn of the New Orleans training base until long after the invasion.

Although Central Intelligence Agency personnel initially organized the training operation here, details of the program were carried out by U.S. Army officers and enlisted men. All U.S. personnel were known to the Cubans only by code names.

Conducted in Spanish, the training consisted of Cuban army tactics, weapons instruction, beach landing techniques and other standard military subjects. Cuban squad tactics were taught since a majority of the recruits had seen service either in the Castro or the Batista army.

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TRAINING LASTED from 7 a. m. to 5 p. m. each day. At night, there were movies, organized athletics and training films for amusement.

The recruits received no money personally, but allotments were sent to their families.

Diaz said the majority of the Cubans had been Castro supporters before they became disillusioned and fled Cuba. There were no active Batista supporters in the unit, he said.

Morale of the local invasion force was very high. Diaz said the troops were provided with many comforts and were satisfied with the quality of the training.

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On April 11, the Cubans were taken to Alvin Callender Naval Air Station at Belle Chasse and flown to an unknown point (local refugees say Lake Charles). Later they boarded a boat for the U.S.-owned Swan Island, about 100 miles north of the coast of Honduras.

There they waited, until they saw that the Bay of Pigs assault was going badly. The decision was made not to commit them to battle.

Instead, Diaz and his men were given orders to land at the "playa de Rio Mocombo," a beach in Oriente province between the town of Baracoa and the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo bay. They arrived at the beach on April 19— but found a strong force of Castro militia men waiting for them.

Subsequently, they returned to Miami—with no losses.

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SHORTLY BEFORE the April 17 invasion, some of the officers involved in the New Orleans training program of the Cubans were sent to Homestead Air Force base south of Miami to keep tabs on the progress of the anti-Castro force.

At Homestead were 10 to 12 delta-winged F-102 fighters (similar to the ones now used by reserve units at Callender Field). The F-102's, armed with deadly "Sidewinder" air-to-air missiles, were poised with engines running, waiting to provide air protection and support to the Bay of Pigs troops.

U.S. sources said the F-102s would have "inhaled" the 25-to-30 Soviet MIG-15 jets which the Castro air force was equipped with at that time. A certain number of the MIG would not fly anyway, since they had been damaged by inept Castro pilots during training.

The rest of the story is well known. The U.S. air cover was called off, reportedly at the insistence of Adlai Stevenson and Chester Bowles. Consequently, the MIGs were never committed—and a handful of outdated American jets, inherited by Castro from the Batista air force, made mincemeat out of the invader's obsolete B-26 propeller-driven bombers.

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ANOTHER ONE of the mysteries of the ill-fated invasion

concerned 13 seriously-ill invaders—and three corpses—picked up in the Gulf and brought here last May 4.

After they were placed in the U.S. Public Health Service hospital here, a veil of secrecy descended and no one heard of them again.

Now, local refugees say that the corpses were buried here. The 13 survivors, after their medical treatment was ended, were sent back to Miami. And so ends the mystery.

WASHINGTON (AP) — With President Kennedy watching in a packed supreme court chamber, Byron White was sworn in today as an associate justice of the court. It is the first time in history that a former law clerk of the